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# From Sex as Sin to Sex as Work: COYOTE and the Reorganization of Prostitution as a Social Problem

VALERIE JENNESS,\* *University of California, Santa Barbara*

*COYOTE (an acronym for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics") is the central organization in the social movement to challenge traditional definitions of prostitution as a social problem. Using historical documents, this work focuses on COYOTE's campaign to sever prostitution from its historical association with sin, crime, and illicit sex, and place the social problem of prostitution firmly in the discourse of work, choice and civil rights. COYOTE has done this through extended debate with law enforcement officials over discrimination and selective enforcement of the law, with the feminist movement over the freedom of women to control and use their bodies as they see fit, and with public health agencies over the role of prostitutes in the AIDS epidemic. Combined, these concerns form the foundation of COYOTE's crusade to redefine prostitution as a social problem.*

While prostitution has never been accepted as a legitimate activity, during the 1970s and 1980s a new image of prostitution has emerged to challenge traditional views of prostitutes as social misfits, sexual slaves, victims of pimps and drug addiction, and tools of organized crime (Bullough and Bullough 1978; Lerner 1986; Otis 1985; Schur 1984; Tannahill 1980). This new image of prostitutes is championed by a social movement with roots both in feminism and in the world of prostitution. The leading prostitutes rights organization in the United States is COYOTE (an acronym for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics"). Founded in 1973 in San Francisco by ex-prostitute Margo St. James, COYOTE has vocal and persuasive leaders. It has gained legitimacy both in the mass media and in the world of government grants, foundation support, the academy, social science disciplines, and non-profit organizations.

As the first and best-known prostitutes' rights groups in United States, COYOTE was originally founded to provide a "loose union of women"—a coalition of housewives, lawyers, feminists, and prostitutes—to expose laws and law enforcement procedures that make prostitution problematic (*San Francisco Magazine* 1973:23). COYOTE has grown into a national organization with national and international affiliates.<sup>1</sup> These organizations continue to act as the leading voice in the prostitutes' rights movement in the United States and abroad (Delacoste and Alexander 1987; Hobson 1987; Pheterson 1989).

COYOTE advocates the repeal of all existing prostitution laws, the reconstitution of prostitution as a credible service occupation, and the protection of prostitutes' rights as legitimate workers. While acknowledging a number of abuses against women associated with prostitu-

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1. COYOTE is based in San Francisco, with branches in Los Angeles, Seattle, Boulder, Sacramento, Fort Lauderdale, Atlanta, Boston, St. Paul, Miami, San Diego, Des Moines, New Orleans, and New York. COYOTE affiliates include FLOP (Friends and Lovers of Prostitutes), CAT (California Advocates for Trollops), DOLPHIN (Dump Obsolete Laws; Prove Hypocrisy Isn't Necessary), 80s Ladies and Friends, HIRE (Hooking Is Real Employment), Hooker's Hookup, HUM (Hooker's Union of Maryland), PASSION (Professional Association Seeking Sexual Identification Observant of Nature), and PUMA (Prostitute Union of Massachusetts Association). COYOTE leaders and supporters formed COYOTE's national and international affiliates: The National Task Force on Prostitution (NTFP) in the United States and the International Committee for Prostitute's Rights (ICPR) in Amsterdam.

tion (e.g., drug abuse among prostitutes, violence against prostitutes, and juvenile prostitution), COYOTE claims that most of the problems associated with prostitution are directly related to the prohibition of prostitution and the stigma attached to sex and especially sex work.

COYOTE is an organization vying for control of the definition of a social problem. In Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) language, it is a "claims-making" organization attempting to participate in the social construction of prostitution as a social problem. COYOTE has attempted to change the discourse surrounding prostitution by severing prostitution from its historical roots with sin, crime, and illicit sex. COYOTE locates the social problem of prostitution firmly in the discourse of work, choice, and civil rights.

My analysis shows that COYOTE has participated in three separate arenas of discourse, each of which has made distinct contributions to the growth and direction of the prostitutes' rights movement. By engaging law enforcement and municipal government officials in debate over selective enforcement and discrimination of the criminal law, COYOTE recruited prostitutes and others to support its cause. In challenging the contemporary women's movement not to ignore their sisters (i.e., prostitutes), COYOTE linked the problems of prostitutes to dilemmas of women elsewhere in society. As the AIDS epidemic reached alarming proportions, prostitutes' rights organizations became a link between public health agencies and sex workers, as well as a watchdog organization to counter assertions that prostitutes were spreading the disease. After discussing my methods of research and the sources of data for this project, I present the core of COYOTE's position. Then I analyze each of the three arenas of discourse through which COYOTE's position has evolved.

## Methods and Data

This work is based on historical documents housed in the archives of The Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. These documents were given to the library by the founder of COYOTE, Margo St. James, and cover the years 1973-1984.<sup>2</sup> These holdings include newsletters of prostitutes' rights organizations, interviews with organizational members and opponents, meeting minutes and notes, questionnaires and reports, position statements, public and personal correspondence, resolutions, grant abstracts and proposals, membership lists, newspaper clippings reporting on COYOTE's political activities, phone logs, budgets, contracts, news releases, conference agendas and charters, and videotapes of four talk shows in which COYOTE representatives were guests, including *The Phil Donahue Show*.

In addition to the material obtained from The Schlesinger Library, I have interviewed and remain in contact with St. James and Priscilla Alexander (the former Co-Director of COYOTE and Executive Director of The National Task Force on Prostitution). Alexander allowed me to consult material in her San Francisco office dated 1984-90. Finally, I relied upon a variety of other sources of information, including published works on COYOTE and the prostitutes' rights movement.

These materials provided me with information on COYOTE's activities, ideology and political strategies. As such, my approach to these data was interpretive and historical. I viewed these documents as the by-products of interested actors playing important roles in definitional processes (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963). Throughout this work, I was concerned with the evolution of COYOTE's claims, as well as the political context in which these activities were embedded. My goal was to examine the viability, rather than the validity, of CO-

2. These holdings are officially "closed" to the public until the death of the founder of COYOTE. However, authorization from St. James enabled me to gain access to the documents. Complete citations for the documents were not always possible since COYOTE did not always attend to preserving that information.

YOTE's claims. Viable claims were understood as definitions and assertions that "live" and that claimants can "get away with" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977). Viability was evident when prostitutes and their advocates, critics, and constituencies gave credibility to claims and definitions by responding to them and/or by offering counterclaims.

## **A New Image of Prostitution**

Three propositions underly COYOTE's crusade to reconstruct the social problem of prostitution. First, prostitution is work and the master concept of work should replace the master concept of crime as the fundamental stance of society toward prostitution. Second, most women who work as prostitutes choose to do so, even in a society where prostitution is, for the most part, illegal. Finally, prostitution is work that people should have the right to choose and that should be respected and protected like work in legitimate service occupations.

### ***Prostitution as "Voluntarily Chosen Service Work"***

The notion of work is central to COYOTE's position. To challenge historically developed images of prostitution, COYOTE's crusade relies upon two accessible and powerful linguistic devices to present an alternative image of prostitutes. One of these is the focus on the "work of prostitution," while the other is the focus on the "civil rights" of prostitutes as service workers. The image of prostitution as work is made evident by COYOTE leaders St. James and Alexander. In an editorial they express their strong reaction to traditional views of prostitution:

A rather profound misconception that people have about prostitution is that it is 'sex for sale,' or that a prostitute is selling her body. In reality, a prostitute is being paid for her time and skill, the price being rather dependent on both variables. To make a great distinction between being paid for an hour's sexual services, or an hour's typing, or an hour's acting on a stage is to make a distinction that is not there (St. James and Alexander 1977:n.p.).

Dolores French, a self-proclaimed prostitute, author, president of the Florida COYOTE, president of HIRE (Hooking is Real Employment), and an appointee on Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young's Task Force on Prostitution, argues that the work of prostitution resembles other kinds of work women do:

A woman has the right to sell sexual services just as much as she has the right to sell her brains to a law firm where she works as a lawyer, or to sell her creative work to a museum when she works as an artist, or to sell her image to a photographer when she works as a model or to sell her body when she works as a ballerina. Since most people can have sex without going to jail, there is no reason except old fashioned prudery to make sex for money illegal (quoted in Henkin 1988:3).

The vocabulary of work is especially pronounced in a testimony on prostitution given to the New York State Bar Association by the leaders of COYOTE:

The laws against pimping (living off the earnings of a prostitute) and pandering (encouraging someone to work as a prostitute) should be repealed, to be replaced with labor laws dealing with working conditions in third-party owned and managed prostitution businesses. Commissions, a majority of whose members should be prostitutes or ex-prostitutes, including individuals who have worked on the street, in massage parlors and brothels, and for escort services, should develop guidelines for the operation of third-party owned and managed businesses, including but not limited to health and safety issues, commissions, and employer/employee relationships. . . . Because prostitution is illegal, women and men who work in third-party run prostitution businesses have no legal status as workers. Therefore, they are unlikely to have their income and social security taxes withheld, or to be provided with health, disability, and worker's compensation insurance, sick leave, vacation pay (St. James and Alexander 1985:1).

COYOTE insists that most prostitution is voluntary. For COYOTE, "most women who work as prostitutes have made a conscious decision to do so, having looked at a number of work alternatives" (*COYOTE Howls* 1988:1). Accordingly, "we need to demand the right of these women to opt for prostitution if that's their choice. We can't deny women a choice" (St. James quoted on "The Phil Donahue Show 1980)." COYOTE does distinguish between those who choose prostitution as work and those who are forced into prostitution to survive. COYOTE claims that "only 15 percent of prostitutes are coerced by third parties" (*COYOTE Howls* 1988:1), and that the problems associated with "forced prostitution cannot be addressed until voluntary prostitution is legitimate" (Delacoste and Alexander 1987:200-201).

### *Prostitution as a Civil Rights Issue*

COYOTE relies upon claims that prostitution is legitimate and voluntarily chosen work as a foundation for claims about prostitutes' civil rights as workers. In 1982, the National Organization for Women (NOW) adopted a COYOTE resolution, which:

... affirms its support of the right of women not to be forced into prostitution, as well as affirms the right of women to choose to work as prostitutes when it is their own choice and, California NOW shall support legislation to decriminalize the voluntary aspects of adult prostitution (Alexander 1983:19).

A public statement submitted to California NOW by COYOTE elaborated on the above declaration in the following assertion:

Whatever one thinks of prostitution, women have the right to make up their own minds about whether or not to work as prostitutes, and under what terms. They have the right to work as freelance workers, just as do nurses, typists, writers, doctors, and so on. They also have the right to work for an employer, a third party who can take care of administration and management problems. . . . They have the right to a full human existence (Alexander 1983:15).

Finally, a 1988 COYOTE newsletter claims that:

prostitutes have the right to work independently, to work in small collectives, or to work for agents, they should be covered by enlightened employment policies providing paid sick leave and vacation, disability, health, and workers compensation insurance, and social security, like other employed workers (*COYOTE Howls* 1988:1).

COYOTE argues that along with the right to choose prostitution as an occupation, prostitutes must have the right not to be subject to public harassment, such as: stigma, rape, violence, denial of health care, denial of protection by and under the law, and denial of alternative job opportunities. From COYOTE's perspective, as workers prostitutes should be afforded equal protection under the law and should be free of violations of their civil rights, especially in the form of legal repression.

COYOTE has made its position felt by pressing claims cloaked in the vocabulary of work, choice, and civil rights in three arenas of discourse: the discourse of law enforcement, the feminist discourse, and AIDS discourse. COYOTE entered the arena of feminist discourse through its national and international campaign to decriminalize prostitution; thus that campaign provided a link between the discourse of law enforcement and the feminist discourse.

### **The Discourse with Law Enforcement**

In 1973, The Point Foundation at Glide Memorial Church provided St. James with a \$5000 grant to organize a prostitutes' union in San Francisco. She recruited an advisory board

of 50 influential San Franciscans, as well as local prostitutes to advocate reform.<sup>3</sup> In addition, anyone could become a member of COYOTE by paying a small fee. Within the first year of its formation, COYOTE claimed a membership of over 1000, ten percent of whom were active prostitutes (Ritter 1973).

As a grassroots advocacy and service organization, COYOTE originally formed to protest a number of abuses of local prostitutes. In the early and mid-seventies, COYOTE's activities centered around: 1) protesting legal discrimination against prostitution, especially police harassment and entrapment; 2) opposing the quarantining of arrested prostitutes for venereal disease; and 3) convincing the community that law enforcement's response to prostitution is a waste of taxpayers' money. COYOTE also provided numerous services for prostitutes, including a hotline for prostitutes called SLIP (Survival Line for Independent Prostitutes), immediate legal assistance for prostitutes who had been arrested, suitable clothing for prostitutes making court appearances, and classes on survival skills for prostitutes in jail.

With slogans such as "Hookers Unite, You Have Nothing to Lose But Cop Harassment," "No More Jive in '75," and "My Ass Is Mine," COYOTE claimed police harassment of prostitutes, not illicit sex, makes prostitution problematic. It is not surprising that police harassment was one of the most immediate concerns of COYOTE. Prior to the formation of COYOTE, the gay community in San Francisco had successfully organized to protest police harassment. As St. James explained, "it's well past time for whores to organize. The homosexuals organized and now the cops are afraid to harass them anymore" (Bryan 1973a:2).

COYOTE members and supporters protested the use of downtown hotels by police to entrap prostitutes. As a San Francisco paper described:

The hookers and their friends were members of COYOTE. They had come to San Francisco's futuristic new Hyatt Regency Hotel to picket the place for being finky and providing vice-coppers with free rooms to entrap their sisters. . . . It was noon and the first day of a week long picketing campaign to bring public attention (and hopefully indignation) to bear on the increasingly frequent use of free rooms in fancy downtown hotels as "lurid set-ups" to which the vice-coppers bring suspected hookers. Once there, COYOTE says the cops entrap the girls into "soliciting" an act of prostitution. Most notorious of the hotels which give the cops their free entrapment rooms is the San Francisco Hilton which COYOTE picketed Oct. 23. Also picketed was the Bellevue Hotel on Oct. 24 and the Stanford Court on Oct. 25. So, COYOTE's campaign got underway in a light drizzle with at least 20 pickets, half a dozen vice cops and six or eight newspaper and television reporters on hand. The signs said: "OFF THE PUSSY PATROL," "MY ASS IS MY OWN," "STOP ENTRAPMENT," "DOES IT HAVE TO BE BAD TO BE GOOD?" and a lot more. COYOTE also participated prominently in the October 24th Board of Supervisors hearing on the question of issuing citations against those accused in 'victimless crimes' rather than hauling them down to jail for booking (Bryan 1973b:1).

Despite denials by the Board of Supervisors, COYOTE's proposal to issue citations for prostitution rather than arresting prostitutes attracted considerable media attention. It was also the source of a heated debate in at least three Board of Supervisors' meetings (Bryan 1974).

COYOTE instigated and/or sponsored at least 26 law suits on behalf of prostitutes. For example, with the support of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), COYOTE filed numerous class action suits challenging the constitutionality of a California statute directed against anyone who solicits or engages in any act of solicitation. Suits were filed on the grounds that

it is an invasion of privacy, overly vague, and restricts freedom of expression, and that the state has no compelling interest in regulating sexual behavior between consenting adults, and therefore, that its selective enforcement violates the right to equal protection (M. Anderson 1975:41).

3. In COYOTE's formative years, the COYOTE letterhead carried the names of novelist Herb Gold, feminist writer Kate Millet, feminist lawyer Florence Kennedy, Zen philosopher Alan Watts, actor Peter Boyle, entertainer Tom Smothers, feminist Betty Dodson, San Francisco's liberal sheriff Richard Hongisto, one time San Francisco art commissioner and noted city maverick Jeremy Ets-Hokin, and labor leader David Jenkins.

COYOTE was successful in lifting a mandatory three-day venereal disease quarantine imposed by the San Francisco Police Department on prostitutes by pressing the claim that the incidence of VD is at least as high among people 20 to 24 years old as among whores and "only women are arrested and forced to have regular checks for VD" (St. James quoted in Metzger 1975:8).

With the slogan "The Trick Is Not Getting Caught," COYOTE's early campaign attempted to bring attention to unequal enforcement of the law. Although solicitation is a crime for both the prostitute and the customer, only prostitutes are arrested. As *The Washington Post* reported:

Margo meets her interviewers with xeroxed copies of papers by psychiatrists, sociologists and lawyers, all tending to demonstrate the laws on the subject are indefensibly biased in favor of the hooker's customers who never gets arrested and against the hooker who often does (von Hoffman 1974:n.p.).

Partially in response to claims such these, one San Francisco judge dismissed prostitution charges against 37 women whose male customers were not arrested. She charged the police with an "intentional purposeful, selective enforcement policy" (Mydans 1976:n.p.). COYOTE was also central in convincing three female judges in San Francisco to participate in the women's political caucus and in peer counseling for prostitutes.

Finally, COYOTE argued that "the real victim of victimless crime [such as prostitution] is the taxpayer" (Terzian 1974:n.p.). For COYOTE, it is a waste of law enforcement's time and resources to arrest prostitutes. As St. James claimed at a hotel protest, "the police have their hands full dealing with real crime and they should not be distracted into pursuits concerning what consenting adults do" (Carib 1973:2). She argued further that "while this city continues to be plagued by crimes against life and property, these overpaid officers are wasting their time and harassing people on non-victim charges (St. James quoted in Bryan 1973a:2).

COYOTE instigated and supported at least two taxpayers' suits in San Francisco and Alameda Counties to decriminalize prostitution on the grounds that it is a waste of taxpayers' money (Ashley 1974). City officials, especially law enforcement officials, responded publicly to COYOTE by suggesting that the use of taxpayers' money to control of prostitution is well-spent. A San Francisco Deputy District Attorney publicly argued, "vice-quad officers look at it the way I do. That there is something sort of subterranean [about vice crime] which if left to grow and fester would overwhelm certain parts of the city" (Butler 1974:6). The Inspector for the San Francisco vice-squad argued that "there's no such thing as a victimless crime. The prostitute is the victim in these crimes. She is usually the victim of a brutal pimp" (Bryan 1973a:n.p.).

COYOTE's campaign against law enforcement generated local controversy. For example, Gloria Steinem sent a letter of support to COYOTE and cancelled a luncheon engagement with City Supervisor Feinstein in protest of Feinstein's failure to support COYOTE's campaign. Only seven months after COYOTE's inception, a San Francisco paper reported that "Margo St. James is overwhelmed with speaking engagements, particularly before groups of law and medical students. . . . Sheriff Dick Hongisto has attended COYOTE meetings" (Ritter 1973:4).

Beginning in 1974, and ending in 1978, COYOTE staged a number of media events designed to raise funds, draw attention to the organization, and legitimate its campaigns.<sup>4</sup> Most notably, COYOTE staged two media events each year to generate revenue and public attention: the Annual Hookers' Convention and the Hookers' Ball. With the slogan "74, Year of the Whore," the first National Hookers' Convention was held in June of 1974 in San Francisco's Glide Memorial Church. The church was packed with prostitutes, plainclothes policemen, city officials, news reporters and interested spectators. National networks and news

4. The 1978 Hooker's Ball, which was attended by San Francisco Police Chief Gain, proved to be the final Hookers' Ball. After lengthy litigation, COYOTE lost rights to the Hookers' Ball, for reasons too complicated to detail here.



magazines covered this event where the "Trick of the Year" award was given out and a giant keyhole was awarded to the "Vice Cop of the Year."

The first Hookers' Ball was held in October 1974 at the San Francisco Longshoreman's Hall. In attendance were such VIPs as state legislator Willie Brown and San Francisco County Sheriff Hongisto. Like the Hookers' Convention, the Hookers' Ball drew attention to COYOTE and its cause, especially from the press. As *The Chicago Tribune* reported, "for the press it was an orgy. They filmed, photographed, and interviewed anyone who was generous with her eyeshadow" (Keegan 1974:1).

The second Hookers' Convention, held in June 1975, featured panels of experts who discussed the decriminalization of prostitution. Over 1,200 people attended, including activists, lawyers, celebrities, and prostitutes. Between these annual events, COYOTE sent out information, attracted the press, provided speakers, organized lawyers, fought hypocrisy in government and the courts, and supported prostitutes in trouble. Each year from 1974 to 1978 the Hookers' Ball drew larger crowds and generated more funds than the previous Ball. The 1977 Hookers' Ball grossed over \$93,000. According to the Bay Area Seating Service (BASS), an event promotion company used by COYOTE, over 1160 publications around the world covered the 1977 Hookers' Ball held in San Francisco.

By 1978 COYOTE had succeeded on a number of fronts in San Francisco: the quarantining of arrested prostitutes was discontinued, public defenders began to make more serious attempts to defend women arrested for prostitution, and arrested prostitutes became eligible to take advantage of the pre-trial diversion program to be released on their own recognizance. Following COYOTE's early political gains, "street walkers and call girls began to take notice, and COYOTE began to branch out" (Kellog 1974:23). Two COYOTE affiliates had also emerged—the Associated Seattle Prostitutes (ASP) and the Prostitutes of New York (PONY). In addition, COYOTE chapters were in the process of organizing in San Diego, New Orleans, Des Moines, and Miami.

COYOTE gained support for its cause from prostitutes and reform minded liberals through its discourse with law enforcement. Supported by local protests and media attention, COYOTE's campaign against law enforcement projected an image of the prostitute as a victim of laws prohibiting prostitution and of the discriminatory enforcement of such laws, rather than a victim of illicit sex. Further, COYOTE suggested that it is simply a waste of taxpayers' money to enforce laws that create and perpetuate rather than eliminate the victimization of prostitutes.

However, it was COYOTE's national and international campaign that solidified a genuinely alternative conception of prostitution. By undertaking these campaigns, COYOTE and its affiliates found a home in the feminist discourse of the late 1970s and early 1980s; especially the feminist discourse that defined rape, pornography and violence against women as social problems (Brownmiller 1975; Dworkin 1981; Griffin 1981; Lederer 1980; Linden et al. 1982; MacKinnon 1983). Through these debates COYOTE developed ties with the contemporary women's movement, and found another forum to press their claims about prostitution.

## COYOTE'S National and International Crusade

In the late 1970s COYOTE began a national and then international crusade to decriminalize prostitution.<sup>5</sup> In order to kick-off a national campaign, in 1976 COYOTE held its Third

5. Prostitute's organizations emerged internationally, including: the International Prostitution Documentation Center and ASPASIE in Geneva; PLAN (Prostitution Laws are Nonsense) and the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP), both of Great Britain; the Comitato Per I Diritti Civili Delle Prostitute (Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes) in Italy; Germany's HYDRA in Berlin, HWG in Frankfurt, Solidarietaet Hamburger Huren (Solidarity of Hamburg Whores) in Hamburg, Messalina in Munich, Kassandra in Nuremberg, Lysistrata in Cologne, and Nitribitt in Bremen; CORP

Annual National Hookers' Convention, also referred to as The First World Meeting of Prostitutes, in Washington, D.C. At this meeting, the first Hookers' Lobby was formed and went to Capitol Hill to promote a resolution calling for the decriminalization of prostitution (Palmer 1976; Volz 1976). Formulated by COYOTE, this resolution was presented in Brussels earlier the same year at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women and was supported by NOW, the ACLU, and other civil rights and women's groups. Sponsored by COYOTE, the Feminist Party, and the First International Hookers' Film Festival, this lobbying effort included delegates from 14 states and Canada, several hundred prostitutes from the East and West coasts, and a chartered planeload of prostitutes and ex-prostitutes from Europe. After lobbying the Capitol, delegates visited political conventions in Kansas City and New York, where they engaged in "loiter-ins" to protest the illegality of prostitution.

In another move to nationalize its campaign, COYOTE declared itself The National Task Force on Prostitution (NTFP) in 1979. With the formation of the National Task Force on Prostitution, the COYOTE newsletter (*COYOTE Howls*) became the *NTFP NEWS*, but bears the logo of COYOTE as well as the subtitle *COYOTE Howls*. Similarly, most National Task Force on Prostitution letterhead bears the trademark of COYOTE, and recent COYOTE letterhead bears the trademark of the National Task Force on Prostitution. In short, COYOTE and the National Task Force on prostitution are essentially the same organization. The NTFP formed in order to promote legitimacy for COYOTE. As Diamant (1981:15) reported, "mail sent on COYOTE stationery wasn't getting responses from the likes of the State Department. So COYOTE has become the more official sounding National Task Force on Prostitution." The National Task Force on Prostitution was also formed to establish an umbrella organization responsible for developing a network of prostitutes' rights advocacy organizations in the United States.

COYOTE's crusade became international when representatives were sent to the United Nations Conference on Women held in Copenhagen in 1980. A week before the 1984 Democratic National in San Francisco, COYOTE sponsored the Second Annual International Hookers' Convention, which was billed as a "Women's Forum on Prostitutes' Rights" (Dorgan 1984). This event capitalized on the media personnel in town for the Democratic Convention. Participants in the hookers' convention also drafted a prostitutes' right platform calling for the repeal of all laws against prostitution, protection and health care for prostitutes, taxation for prostitutes, and a code of ethics.

In 1985 COYOTE's international crusade continued with the formation of the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR) based in The Netherlands. The International Committee on Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR) sponsored the World Whores' Congress in Amsterdam in 1985 and in Brussels in 1986. Founders, representatives, and members of prostitutes' rights organizations from all over the world attended these conferences. Two hundred sex workers and their invited advocates from 16 countries attended the 1986 meeting and were provided with security guards, translators, and considerable media coverage. The activities and claims from the conference were eventually published in two editions of the newsletter *World Wide Whore's News* (WWWN) and in a book entitled *The Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (Pheterson 1989).

As COYOTE extended its crusade to the national and the international scenes, it developed close ties with contemporary feminism.

### **The Feminist Discourse**

Although the contemporary women's movement addresses a broad set of concerns, sexu-

(Canadian Organization for Prostitutes) in Canada; the Australian Prostitutes Collective in Australia; the Austrian Association of Prostitutes in Austria; De Rode Draad (The Red Thread) and De Roze Draad (The Pink Thread) in the Netherlands; and The National Association of Prostitutes in Brazil.

ality has loomed especially large on its agenda (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Ferree and Hess 1985). Subsumed in the feminist discourse on sexuality are discussions of the social control of women's sexuality, women's rights to control their bodies, and institutionalized violence against women. Central to these discussions is a concern for liberating women from the sexual and social double standard.

The centrality these concerns within the contemporary women's movement provided COYOTE with a fertile ground for the development and public presentation of analyses of prostitution and its relationship to the status of women. By entering and shaping contemporary feminist discourse, COYOTE cemented ties with the women's movement and ensured that prostitution represented a difficult dilemma for feminists (Alexander 1987; Hobson 1987; Pheterson 1989; Snider 1976; St. James and Alexander 1977). Although NOW adopted a resolution to decriminalize prostitution in 1973, it wasn't until the late 1970s that NOW recognized prostitution as a legitimate issue. Nonetheless, the women's movement in the United States has been slow to support prostitute women (Jaget 1980).

One of the first significant alliances COYOTE established with a nationally recognized women's organization was with the Wages for Housework Campaign. *The Chicago Tribune* reported that:

strumpets and housewives both need the power money brings . . . [and] many prostitutes are also mothers with second jobs. Last September in a Chicago suburb, the FBI arrested three women who were part of a \$100-a-night call girl operation. Many of the hookers were housewives supplementing family incomes (Gorner 1977:2).

The Los Angeles Wages for Housework chapter also formed an alliance with COYOTE to put government and business on trial for "pimping off prostitution and pimping off all the work women do." The coalition claimed that "an attack against prostitutes is an attack on all women" (Wages for Housework 1977:8).

Boasting a membership of 20,000, in 1979 COYOTE aligned itself with NOW to promote a "Kiss and Tell" Campaign designed to strengthen lobbying efforts for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).<sup>6</sup> During this time, the immediate goal of COYOTE became the passage of the ERA and securing public funding for abortions (Castonia 1979:B14). A 1979 COYOTE newsletter reported:

COYOTE has called on all prostitutes to join the international "Kiss and Tell" campaign to convince legislators that it is in their best interest to support the decriminalization of prostitution, the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion funding, lesbian and gay rights, and all other issues of importance to women. The organizers of the campaign are urging that the names of legislators who have consistently voted against those issues, yet are regular patrons of prostitutes, be turned over to feminist organizations for their use (*COYOTE Howls* 1979:1).

COYOTE also secured affiliations with such organizations as the ACLU, NOW, The California Democratic Council, the California Corrections and Parole Officers Association, the Northern California Business and Professional Women's Organization, The Feminist Party, Wages for Housework, lesbian and gay advocacy organizations, CAL-PEP (California Prostitutes' Education Program), the American Bar Association, many State Bar Associations and various Barristers' Clubs.

While focusing on coalition building and establishing recognition as a legitimate national civil rights organization, COYOTE also entered the feminist discourse on violence against wo-

6. The "Kiss and Tell" idea originated in Europe, particularly Spain and Portugal, where it had some success. In Spain this tactic was used to rid the country of its adultery laws, which had been enforced only against women. In Portugal, this tactic was used to keep abortion and prostitution laws out of the new legal code. The Kiss and Tell campaign required that prostitutes violate their own code of ethics. As *COYOTE Howls* reported, "one of the points in the prostitute's code of ethics is that the prostitute will never divulge the name of the client" (Alexander 1979a:4).

men. COYOTE's central claim was that "outlawing of prostitution promotes rape and violence against women" (St. James quoted in Nielson 1979:105).

Combining claims about prostitution and rape, St. James argued in a speech delivered at Western Washington University that:

Prohibition [of prostitution] promotes disrespect for women, promotes violence and promotes rape. . . . If we had legalized porn and prostitution at the same time, we wouldn't be sitting on the powder keg of sex and violence we're sitting on in this country (quoted in Reiper 1982:3).

This argument was pressed further by St. James and Alexander in an editorial:

what the decriminalization of pornography has done is to allow an entire industry to develop that is based on a taunting and baiting, "look, but don't touch" philosophy that is compounded by the prohibition of prostitution. . . . Should a woman offer to put on a private, pornographic show for an undercover officer, she would be arrested for soliciting an act of prostitution (Alexander and St. James 1981:n.p.).

Finally, while addressing an Episcopal church congregation in Alameda County, California, St. James claimed that prostitution should not be isolated from pornography because present laws allow "white males to sell women's bodies, but do not allow women to sell their bodies themselves" (Anderson 1984:14).

Alexander, a former member of the California and National Boards of Directors of NOW and a founding member of Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), has been central in making public COYOTE's fight against violence against women. She has consistently argued that the decriminalization of prostitution would help reduce violence against women, especially rape and pornography:

The NTFP is calling on the National Organization for Women to implement its 1973 resolution calling for decriminalization by establishing a prostitution task force to put pressure on the legislature. It is important that other feminist organizations, the National Women's Political Caucus and the League of Women Voters, for example, make the issue a priority alongside of the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, domestic violence, rape, and lesbian and gay rights. Only when women are treated equally in this society, both sexually and economically, will the tremendous abuse that women face be eliminated (Alexander 1979b:3).

Through contemporary feminist discourse on violence against women, COYOTE's crusade responded to feminist analyses of prostitutes as sexual slaves who are victimized by impersonal and commercialized sex.

### ***WHISPER and the Emergence of an Organized Nemesis***

Along with the emergence of COYOTE's crusade, competing images of prostitution began to surface within the feminist discourse on violence against women. Most prominent among these was the image of the prostitute described by Kathleen Barry (1979) in her book *Sexual Slavery*. In this book, Barry describes women who are abducted or sold for sexual purposes and transported to the United States, West Germany, Saudi Arabia and other countries. The book, which has been translated into four languages, served as the basis for a 1983 United Nations report that said "prostitution is slavery" and a grave cause for international concern (Klemesrud 1985:C16). Barry founded the International Feminist Network Against Female Sexual Slavery in 1983 in Rotterdam. Financed by grants from the Dutch Government and the Ford Foundation, this network included women who worked with grassroots women's organizations from 24 countries.

WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt) emerged in the early 1980s. With its headquarters in New York City, WHISPER is an organization made up of volunteers, feminist scholars, and clergy who are concerned with saving prostitutes from the life of prostitution. WHISPER argues that prostitution must be understood as an institution

created by patriarchy to control and abuse women. WHISPER claims that no woman *chooses* prostitution and that all prostitutes are victims. As Sarah Wynter, editor of the WHISPER newsletter, argued:

Prostitution isn't like anything else. Rather everything else is like prostitution, because it is a model for women's condition, for gender stratification and its logical extension, sex discrimination. Prostitution is founded on enforced sexual abuse under a system of male supremacy that is itself built along a continuum of coercion. . . . We, the women of WHISPER, reject the lie that women freely choose prostitution (quoted in Delacoste and Alexander 1987:268-269).

The primary objective of WHISPER is the abolition of prostitution, not just laws prohibiting prostitution.

In the early 1980s a schism developed between COYOTE's campaign and feminist analyses of prostitution such as those exemplified by WHISPER. This schism centered on the tension between COYOTE's crusade to empower prostitutes and legitimate prostitution as work, and WHISPER's attempts to rescue prostitutes from what they see as an inherently powerless position. A story covering a pornography and prostitution conference in which St. James was a panelist reported:

What she's [St. James] selling, which some parts of the women's movement are having trouble buying, is the vision of prostitution as a viable career option. In St. James' vision, the crass marketplace sexuality of the female skin trade is not the problem. An advocate of decriminalization, she sees prostitution as a labour issue with poor working conditions, an absence of collective bargaining rights and hostile legislators as its key determinants. And while many anti-porn feminists are sympathetic to their hooker sisters and offer resources from the women's community to fight laws which hound them, they are having trouble swallowing COYOTE's appeal to artisanal pride in the craft of commercial sex. . . . The historic feminist identity with women of the night has traditionally been constructed out of empathy for the desperate victims of harsh socio-economic realities. But increasingly, voices in the sex industry are offering an alternative perspective—one that sees prostitutes as active agents in their vocation choice (Kirzner 1985:n.p.).

After attending a conference supported by the Dutch Government on sexual slavery, St. James located COYOTE's claims in its conflict with WHISPER:

I recently travelled to the Netherlands to participate in a conference on sexual slavery by the Dutch Government—since the U.S. would never fund such a thing. It was organized by Kathy Barry, author of *Female Sexual Slavery*, a book which borders on equating slavery with prostitution. Although she gives lip service to decriminalization, she finds it impossible to grant it a professional status equal to her own (St. James 1980:7).

Moreover, COYOTE's 1984-85 charter stressed that "all prostitutes are *not* inert, helpless objects to whom men do an endless number of things." Gail Pheterson, the Co-Director of the International Committee on Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR), asserted that "in trying to stop abuses in prostitution, one should not try to put the women out of work" (quoted in Henkin 1989:5).

The emergence of an organized ideological nemesis fueled COYOTE's crusade by generating controversy. *The New York Times* reported that:

Miss Barry said one of the biggest problems she faces in her work is "the happy hooker" image, which she believes tends to glorify prostitution and makes it seem like an alternative work experience. "The Xaviera Hollanders of the world only represent about 5 percent of the prostitute population," she said, quoting from her research. "More often, prostitutes are runaways who become pimp-controlled, and pimp-controlled prostitution is female sexual slavery." . . . Asked about Margo St. James, who heads Coyote, a San Francisco-based organization that defends prostitutes' rights, she replied, "Margo was very helpful in providing information about women being victimized and exploited by police. But we basically disagree, because I want to end prostitution, and she regards it as a viable profession (Klemserud 1985:C16).

The emergence of organized opposition such as this suggests that COYOTE's claims have not

only generated an audience, but have also been taken seriously enough to warrant counterclaims.

Through us national and international campaigns, COYOTE participated in debates within contemporary feminist discourse. In the process COYOTE reached beyond the technical aspect of the enforcement of criminal laws governing prostitution. Using feminist discourse on violence against women as a forum, COYOTE put forth images of prostitutes that challenge both traditional images of prostitution and recent feminist analyses of prostitution as a social problem. Through coalition building and the development of ties with the contemporary women's movement, COYOTE pressed their claims about the rights of women to choose prostitution as a viable service occupation. The emergence of an organized nemesis, WHISPER, led to a crystallization of COYOTE's views, both within the women's movement and before a wide public audience.

### The Discourse on Aids

The AIDS epidemic represents the most recent and the most dramatic change in the political environment of prostitutes' rights organizations. In addition to posing a health threat to prostitutes, the AIDS epidemic represents a social and legal threat to prostitutes as well. Accordingly, when prostitutes met at the Second Annual International Hookers' Convention in 1984, "AIDS was very much on their minds" (Mitchell 1984:10). By the end of the Second World Whores Congress in 1986, "the AIDS epidemic had reached alarming proportions and prostitutes were being scapegoated for spreading the disease" (Pheterson 1989:28).

Many governmental and medical establishments reacted to AIDS with calls for increased regulation of prostitution in the form of registration, mandatory AIDS testing, and prison sentences for those carrying antibodies to the virus. With the spread of AIDS well-documented, and without a viable cure in sight, the introduction of legislation calling for mandatory AIDS testing of prostitutes has been introduced across the nation.<sup>7</sup> In short, the AIDS epidemic has led to increased social control of prostitutes, especially in the form of legal sanctions.

COYOTE and other prostitutes' rights organizations have recently devoted considerable activity to the threats that AIDS poses to prostitutes. In 1986 St. James moved to France to work through the International Committee on Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR). *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported a change in the leadership of COYOTE and the organization's emerging concern for the scapegoating of prostitutes for AIDS:

When Margo St. James moves to Europe at the end of March, she will leave behind her Rolodex. . . . [She] will turn everything over to Priscilla Alexander, a feminist educator, and Gloria Lockett, a former prostitute. . . . The teaming of feminist and hooker pleases St. James. . . . Alexander's main concern is educating the public about prostitution and AIDS. Prostitutes are always linked in the public's mind with the spread of disease, she said. "But there isn't any documented evidence of a customer getting AIDS from a prostitute." (Rubin 1986:n.p.)

Consistent with this change in leadership, COYOTE's immediate goal became combatting the scapegoating of prostitutes through public education. As a 1988 COYOTE charter stated:

COYOTE is working to prevent the scapegoating of prostitutes for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and to educate prostitutes, their clients, and the general public about prevention of these diseases (*COYOTE Howls* 1988:1).

Many of COYOTE's activities from the mid-eighties to the present respond to the notion

7. As of 1988, many states had introduced legislation requiring mandatory testing of arrested prostitutes. Georgia, Florida, Utah, and Nevada now forcibly test arrested prostitutes.

that prostitutes represent a pool of contagion. Ex-prostitute and COYOTE Co-Director Gloria Lockett claimed at a press conference in San Francisco in 1988:

Prostitutes test no higher for exposure to HIV than other women—when studies take into consideration IV drug use -and since prostitutes use condoms, they should not be targeted for measures which so patently violate our civil rights (quoted in Winklebleck 1988:2).

COYOTE has distributed public announcements, attended conferences, issued press releases, and staged protests to oppose legislation requiring the mandatory testing of prostitutes for the AIDS virus.

COYOTE also has protested AIDS testing on the grounds that selective testing is discriminatory and a violation of prostitutes' civil rights:

Outraged members of COYOTE, a national organization concerned with the rights of male and female prostitutes, sent up a howl in San Francisco last week at the recent passage of two state bills aimed at putting prostitutes who test HIV positive behind bars. . . . Earlier this year COYOTE joined ranks with AIDS activists ACT UP and the US Prostitutes Collective to protest the proposed legislation before Speaker of the House Willie Brown and other politicians and lobbyists in Sacramento. They argued that the proposals singled out and unfairly punished a group which tests HIV positive no more frequently than do other sexually active women in the United States. "Prostitutes haven't been transmitting AIDS," asserted Carol Leigh (a.k.a. Scarlet Harlot), COYOTE legislative media coordinator. "Most of the prostitutes I know are getting tested on their own. They use condoms. Obviously we're being used as a symbol" (Everett 1988:n.p.).

The primacy of AIDS related activity is also evident in COYOTE's January 1989 newsletter which offered exclusive coverage of the AIDS epidemic, including AIDS laws affecting prostitutes which were passed in California in 1989 (*Coyote Howls* 1989). In short, the AIDS epidemic has potentially circumvented COYOTE's original primary goal of decriminalization. As Alexander (personal communication 21 September 1988) explained, "we [COYOTE] don't have time for focusing a concerted effort on decriminalization, we're worried about quarantining [of prostitutes]."

The AIDS epidemic has prompted government agencies, such as Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta and the State of California Department of Health, to invite prostitutes' rights organizations to assist them in investigating the role of prostitution in the spread of the disease. For example, in 1987 COYOTE was asked by the AIDS Activity Office of the California Department of Health to submit a proposal for an AIDS prevention project for prostitutes. As a result, the California Prostitutes' Education Program (CAL-PEP), which operates out of COYOTE's office in San Francisco and bears COYOTE's letterhead and logo, was awarded a \$40,000 grant for the purpose of educating street prostitutes about safer sex practices and intravenous hygiene. CAL-PEP has also received funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Centers for Disease Control, the Alameda County Health Department, and the San Francisco District Attorney's Office.

The AIDS epidemic has altered the politics of prostitution, as well the political environment of prostitutes' rights organizations such as COYOTE. Key individuals, constituencies, and organizations in COYOTE's environment have become increasingly dependent upon prostitutes' rights organizations for resources. Prostitutes' organizations such as COYOTE are in a position to provide access to prostitutes who may need AIDS education, and knowledge about how to effectively educate prostitutes. This gives prostitutes' rights organizations a legitimate purpose, an opportunity to work within the system, and an institutionalized forum for pressing claims.

## Discussion

Although prostitution has existed in every society for which there are written records (Bullough and Bullough 1978; Otis 1985; Tannahill 1980), prostitutes' rights organizations such as COYOTE are a fairly recent development in the history of prostitution in particular and sexual politics more generally. Never before have prostitutes acted as their own advocates, both challenging commonly held notions about prostitution and offering proposals for reform. COYOTE consists of and represents individuals who have been socially and culturally stigmatized, degraded and segregated. As Kitsuse (1980:2) remarked in 1980, "who would have thought that prostitutes would lobby the halls of legislative bodies to denounce 'your old tired ethics.'"

Shielded by a small but vocal movement that views prostitution as legitimate work, prostitutes' rights organizations such as COYOTE have emerged from the "lunatic fringe" into public attention (DeYoung 1984). Their arrival has been greeted with ambivalence, support, criticism, and organized opposition (Hobson 1987; Jaget 1980; Pheterson 1989; Weitzer 1989). Viewing themselves as a beleaguered minority group whose time to advocate reform has come, COYOTE and its affiliates have permanently affected the rhetorical landscape surrounding prostitution as a social problem:

Margo St. James and COYOTE are not to be dismissed as kooky California phenomes. She is internationally respected by a global network of whores, ex-whores, and people who support the hooker's right to work (Diamant 1981:16).

Due to increased visibility and the development of a support base through coalition building, COYOTE's grassroots campaign flourished as a national and then an international crusade. Focusing on discriminatory law enforcement practices against prostitutes, the feminist discourse on violence against women, and AIDS, COYOTE's campaign of the early and mid seventies moved beyond specific reforms and service provisions to challenge existing images of prostitutes as social misfits, deviant actors, victimized women and sexual slaves.

While the identification and acknowledgement of "problematic conditions" and/or "undesirable conditions" is a necessary element in the process of redefining social phenomena as problematic, it is not a sufficient element. Klapp (1972:340) has noted, "the symbolic task [of any] movement is to construct new meanings and values." Unlike Gusfield's (1967) repentant deviant, COYOTE has developed a radical critique of popular views of prostitution by substituting a new ethic that affirms their behavior as sensible and moral. In Kitsuse's (1980) terms, COYOTE represents an instance of deviants "coming out all over" not in acts of confession, but rather to profess and advocate the lives they live, along with the worth and values those lives express. COYOTE's crusade has made public a lengthy list of grievances. At the same time, COYOTE's campaign has offered new definitions, explanations, and understandings of prostitution and prostitutes by putting forth numerous claims that redefine prostitution as a social problem.

At the heart of COYOTE's crusade are three primary claims. First, COYOTE claims that not all prostitution is forced prostitution; in fact, often prostitution is voluntarily chosen. Second, COYOTE claims that prostitution is work and should be respected (i.e., destigmatized) as work like any other type of service work. Finally, COYOTE claims that to deny a woman the option to work as a prostitute under conditions of her own choosing is a civil rights violation. Combined, these claims define prostitution as problematic because of its relationship to something our culture purports to abhor; namely, the violation of individuals' civil rights and social rights based on membership in a particular group.

COYOTE redefines the social problem of prostitution by declaring its presence openly and without apology in order to claim prostitutes' rights of citizenship, especially their right to work under conditions of their own choosing. In framing the social problem of prostitution in this manner, COYOTE's activities threaten to take ownership of the "problem" of prostitution



away from traditional experts by disavowing prostitutes' deviant status and legitimating the work of prostitutes.

By invoking and institutionalizing a vocabulary of sex as work, prostitutes as sex workers, and prostitutes' civil rights as workers, COYOTE's claims sever the social problem of prostitution from its historical association with sin, criminality and illicit sex. The social problem of prostitution is firmly placed in the rhetoric of work and civil rights. When terminologies change, when new terms are invented, or existing terms given new meanings, these signal actions that something important has happened to the career of a social problem. After all, the categories and meanings that they have created have direct consequences for the ways such phenomena are conceived, evaluated, and treated. To the degree that COYOTE's vocabulary is adopted and institutionalized (e.g., "sex work" and "voluntary prostitution"), concepts of the opposing groups fall into obscurity (e.g., prostitutes as sexual slaves and as victims).

In view of the historically developed and deeply ingrained views on prostitution, redefining prostitution as a social problem is a difficult task. Indeed, prostitutes' rights organizations must operate under a "heavy yoke of disreputability" (Weitzer 1989). Nonetheless, COYOTE, as well as its track record and social remnants, still exists in a field where many have failed. COYOTE's crusade and the degree to which COYOTE's claims have been or will be adopted by the public is important in at least two respects. First, in part it will determine the degree to which the activities of COYOTE have fundamentally altered prostitutes' political as well as cultural situation. Second, the impact of COYOTE's claims will help determine the future of the prostitutes' rights movement currently underway in the United States and abroad, as well as the future of prostitution as a social problem.

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